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ABSTRACT

This paper examines ideas about school scheduling and student learning. It also offers suggestions for schools that are considering the adoption of alternative school calendars. It describes a case study in which a progressive school district modified its school calendar in order to improve instructional opportunities for student learning. The calendar included 10 additional days of instruction, a more continuous learning program, quality intersession programs, and nontraditional financing. Parents and teachers were reluctant to change, which illustrates the need for educators to use effective communication strategies. Suggestions for moving through the change process include the following: (1) provide information to the community about alternative schedules for increased student learning time; (2) offer evidence about the plan's advantages, disadvantages, and effects on student achievement and attitudes; and (3) establish a forum for dialogue. Contains 14 references. (LMI)

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Quality Schools
and
The Myth of the Nine-Month School Year

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Quality Schools and the Myth of the Nine-Month School Year

Introduction:

In an international comparison of educational systems, the National Center for Education Statistics (1992) listed the average number of days in a school year for American elementary and secondary students at 178 days . Because states have the authority to establish the number of days the public schools shall be in session and because the number of student days required by each state is similar, it would be easy to conclude that it is a matter of policy in the United States for schools to meet for approximately nine months during the calendar year. Local boards of education and school administrators play a major role in determining how time in the school day and school year is arranged and in each classroom teachers have the ultimate responsibility for matching the educational program with the pieces of time allocated for instruction. At each juncture, time is the element that controls the learning environment. There is a growing consensus among educators and the public that either more learning time or different arrangements for learning time are needed if schools are to accomplish their educational and social responsibilities. New technologies, global economies, rapidly changing social environments, the changing of American life-styles, and the needs of students are driving the dialogue about time and school.

Arguments in favor of increased time in school are not new. During the past 80 years requests to examine the length of the school day and school year have been numerous. The American School Board Journal (1990) cited an article from 1917 that called for increasing the amount of time students were in school.

The article revealed, "an ever increasing number of superintendents is advocating a radical reduction in the length of summer vacations and is seeking a correspondingly longer school term. The success of summer sessions and the splendid results achieved from experimental "all year schools" indicates clearly that schools are overlooking an opportunity for better educational service and greater economy. From then until now the issue of reallocating student time in school has been hotly debated. Generally the subject of time in school arises when there is a crisis of confidence in the nations ability to conduct its business or when taxpayers question the rising costs of public education. Most recently the issue of our capacity to compete economically with other developed nations, particularly Japan, raised questions about the necessity to increase the number of school days required of American students. It is somewhat of a mystery that the number of school days required of American students are linked so closely with the inability of the"big three auto makers" or other corporate entities to retain their sales dominance in the world market. It is especially intriguing since Ford, the Chrysler Corporation, and General Motors most recently made claims that they were positioned to once again dominate the world automobile market . What is curious is that from the time they lost market share to the time they have presumably regained it, the school year in America has remained virtually the same.

Perhaps there are many more compelling arguments for moving to a full time school system than economic competitiveness alone. The recent wave of school restructuring has caused us to look seriously at the mission of American schools and to redefine what we, as a nation, want and expect from our public schools. Studies of extended school years and year-round education have not provided conclusive evidence that more time in school increases test scores on

academic measures. However, there are logical arguments to address the need for moving away from the nine-month on, three-month off cycle of schooling. A more continuous learning pattern, better use of school facilities, the alleviation of overcrowding in certain districts, and the opportunity to extend learning experiences are a few of the reasons to consider other configurations of the school calendar. Moorman and Ergermeier (1992) stated, "a community should base its faith in a school not on the school's conformance with a structure thought to provide predictability and control but on the strength of the school's mission and plans for achieving it."

The purposes of this paper are to examine ideas about time patterns, learning and school and present a plan for districts to use if they are considering the adoption of alternative time patterns. A case study (Dlugosh, 1992)was used to illustrate an attempt by one school district to modify its calendar to improve instructional opportunities for student learning. With the case study as a basis, a plan was developed to assist other school districts to begin or continue the dialogue with their publics about alternatives to the nine-month school calendar.

A Case In Point: Midwestern Community Schools

In 1991, a progressive school district (Midwestern Community Schools) with a K-12 population of 4700 students, long recognized for its innovative programs, high student achievement, and excellent parental support, proposed to implement a "custom calendar" that would have modified the traditional school year. The district was both financially and educationally sound and the plan it presented was aimed at improving the capacity of the district to provide additional instruction for students. The objectives of the proposed "custom

calendar" and a brief explanation of the reasons for the changes are listed below

- To provide for 10 additional days of instruction by the year 2000.
  Explanation: increased demands of the information age and changing societal needs have increased the demands on instructional time; more time is needed to support additional instruction.

- To create a more continuous learning program.
  Explanation: Loss of learning occurs over extended breaks, especially during long summer breaks; this loss can be reduced and more learning can be retained through a continuous calendar.

- To provide quality intersession programs.
  Explanation: Intersessions, the 10 day periods separating the instructional blocks, would be used to provide for an extension of learning time for students to practice basic skills, expand their understanding in selected curriculum areas, and provide extended learning opportunities on and off campus.

- To procure non-traditional financing and support for intersession programs.
  Explanation: To extend learning opportunities without it becoming a burden on district taxpayers.

- To reduce stress and fatigue for students and teachers.
  Explanation: More frequent, shorter, and better spaced vacations offer opportunities for staff, families, and students.

The objectives reflect attention to student need, a desire to offer quality break periods combined with the instructional advantages offered via intersessions, and an attempt to balance financial obligations among local agencies and outside funding sources. Implementation of the proposed calendar would have necessitated an August 3rd opening date for the Fall semester and would have added two days to the overall school calendar during its first year of operation.

Midwestern Community Schools planned a variety of opportunities to inform its publics about the proposed custom calendar. It conducted 28 orientation meetings, 28 follow-up meetings throughout the Fall and Winter, and 2 public

hearings in the early Spring to provide parents, students, staff, and patrons of the district with information about the goals and objectives of the proposed calendar and to outline the districts' needs for changing the school calendar. Approximately 1700 people attended one or more of the sessions. Feedback about the custom calendar was recorded and transcribed. A brief analysis of the transcripts yielded information organized in eight general categories.

Intersessions:

473 items related to the concept of intersessions, the two week period between each quarter. For the most part , people wanted to know more about the purpose of the intersession, the type of programs to be held during intersessions, how students would be selected to attend, how much intersessions would cost and who would pay for them.

Interruptions:

Many of the participants at the orientations and hearings indicated the district should determine how interruptions during the regular calendar year could be reduced and the time used for instruction. 164 questions and comments addressed interruptions and allocating the time already available to better use.

Vacations and Sports:

155 items were recorded under the category vacations and sports. Comments ranged from "vacations are important family times" and "an early start would interrupt them" to "athletic calendars would need to change to accommodate the school calendar, but they won't." Many people indicated the intersessions would provide new opportunities for family vacations.

Early Starting Date:

Most of the 115 comments recorded in this category referenced the August 3 starting date as "too early" or "give us some lead time to prepare for an earlier starting date - maybe in a year or two." Generally , people were reluctant to "rush into" the earlier starting date. (The district had planned to implement the custom calendar in the upcoming school year and parents did not feel ready to accept a change that was so immediate.)

Stress:

108 comments were related to the area of relieving stress on students and teachers by providing short, well timed breaks. There appeared to be an equal split between those who believed the custom calendar would relieve stress on families and those who thought it would cause more stress.

Adding Days to the Calendar:

There was considerable positive agreement in 82 comments about adding days to the calendar. Generally favorable; some thought 10 days were not enough and the district should consider adding more days.

Finance:

86 responses related to cost and taxes. Most people wanted much more information about the cost of the proposed calendar. They wanted definite figures and they wanted to know how costs might impact people on fixed incomes.

Research and Evaluation:

47 responses indicated a need for more research about the effects of extended school years and how the impact on students and achievement would be evaluated. Generally, they wanted to to be assured of the benefits they were likely to accrue as a result of any change.

The people who spoke at orientation sessions and hearings indicated a need for more information about the new plan and requested time to study the issue. Some were very opposed to any tinkering with the present school calendar, but most indicated support to investigate the issue further. Almost 400 people attended the school board meeting where the issue was scheduled for a vote. They asked the board to delay implementation of the custom calendar and to investigate how the district could take better advantage of the current time pattern through the elimination of interruptions to the learning process.

After reviewing testimony from people in attendance at the public hearings and listening to parents and patrons at the board meeting, the board of education

decided to delay full implementation of the custom calendar and take the advice of patrons to study current allocations of time in the schools to try to determine if additional instructional time could be gained by eliminating some of the interruptions to the school day.

Midwestern Community Schools began its time-utilization study with teachers at the elementary school level. After surveying the elementary faculty district officials reported the following findings to the board and administrative staff:

- Approximately 67% of the teachers said they preferred to devote between 4.5 and 5 hours to student learning activities. 73% of the teacher indicated they actually devoted between 4 and 5.5 hours of time to student learning activities during their present calendar day arrangement.

- 78% of the elementary teachers indicated the length of the school day was just right, 17.% said it was too short and 5% said it was too long.

- 70% of the teachers indicated the length of the school year was just right, 17% thought it was too short and 13% believed it was too long.

- Over 62% of the elementary teachers surveyed estimated they could possibly gain 15 minutes, but less than 30 minutes of instructional time per day by reducing interruptions such as pulling students out of class for band, P.E., and resource room and by the district providing them with additional help to work with learning disabled students.

- 61% of the elementary teachers indicated they could make better use of existing instructional time by integrating content areas within the curriculum. Well over half of the teacher surveyed said instructional time could be enhanced by providing them with uninterrupted planning time (90%), providing teacher aides and other support staff to assist teachers (61%),and scheduling activities such as band and strings before or after the regular school day (56%).

Teacher support for extending the number of school days or lengthening the school year was not evident at the elementary level. The same was found to be true in an independent study of the secondary school staff, although many of the

secondary teachers indicated they would appreciate an opportunity to be employed on an 11 or 12 month basis.

The case study serves as one example of the frustration facing educators who feel pressured to complete their mission under current time constraints while the world around them is exploding with new information and change, but are not able to shift the organization toward a new pattern of thought. It also offers insights about school and time as viewed from the perspective of parents and other taxpayers. In that sense, it provides an opportunity for schools to create a dialogue about the need to reassess priorities related to time and learning. There were probably many reasons for the reluctance of people in Midwestern Community Schools to reject the custom calendar; in this paper we can only speculate as to why the issue was not accepted on its face.

- First, the dialogue about the custom calendar with the clients of the school district took place after the proposal was developed, even though it was developed with the assistance of citizens representatives from across the district. The school may have assumed that their reasons for requesting additional instructional time was a widely shared notion.

- Second, it is difficult to convince parents and other district patrons that additional time deserves their support when a majority of the teaching staff was not favorably inclined to support extensions of the day or year.

- Third, students in the district were already achieving at high levels as measured by traditional tests, so there was no evidence of any type of educational crisis. By the same token, parents were satisfied with the achievement level of their children so they saw little need to bolster the instructional delivery system.

- Fourth, many of the patrons and parents of the district had the means to provide additional educational experiences for their children as they saw fit. Some of them used the summer months for such experiences as academic camps, foreign travel, and extended family vacations.

- Fifth, perhaps not enough evidence was brought forward to convince people that 10 additional days per school year provided additional academic advantages for students.

- Sixth, Change is difficult. Shifting from a traditional school calendar to a new concept of time creates uncertainty on the part of the staff and patrons. It is complicated by the fact that many people are not aware of the variety of ways in which a school can allocate time. Most people have only heard about lengthening the day or year.

The situation reveals the power of the traditional mental model of school and time in the United States. it also serves to remind educators that they will need to present evidence to counter old arguments about time in school and to present logical and compelling reasons about the benefits to be gained from modifying the traditional school calendar. The good news is, there appears to be a growing body of evidence to suggest the alternative school calendars are gaining acceptance. The not-so-good news is old habits are difficult to break.

The Difficult Task of Changing Mental Models

"Metanoia" is the Greek word Senge (1990, p.13-14) used to remind us that the deeper meaning of "learning" involves a fundamental shift of mind. "Real learning," he said, "gets to heart of what it means to be human. Through learning we perceive our world and our relationship to it. Through learning we we extend our capacity to create, to be a part of the generative process of life." While there may be plenty of evidence available to help people shift their mind in the direction of alternative time patterns for school, it will not be easy because there is a certain comfort level with the traditional school year. Bisesi (1983) wrote about the tendency of people to become comfortable with the way things are, especially in the face of the introduction of alternative prospects or methodologies. He described this level of comfort as frozen evaluation. "Once we have found cozy niches for people, organizations or societies" he stated, "we fix those descriptions in our minds as immutable reference points." The American school year appears to be one of those immutable reference points.

Regardless of the difficulty, changes do occur. Schein (1969) described change as a three level process;*"unfreezing, changing ,and refreezing.* During the unfreezing stage, Schein said "individuals who will be responsible for implementing the change and those directly affected by it must be convinced of the need for change. It is a time of letting go of old beliefs and patterns and developing a desire to try the new. Stage two, implementation of the actual change , requires the development of new patterns of behavior based on new information. The third stage, refreezing, involves the stabilizing and general acceptance of the change."

Assuming the Midwestern Community Schools were in the first stage of the change process described by Schein, attempting to convince the general public that a need for change existed, it was necessary to provide some suggestions to assist them to move through the entire process. The suggestions are as follows:

(1) Continue to provide an education for the community about the alternatives available for scheduling learning time for students.

(2) Offer evidence about the advantages and disadvantages of the alternative time patterns and their impact on student achievement and student attitude.

(3) Establish a forum for a dialogue about the function and purpose (mission) of school in a post-industrial society; a society where production time is measured in fractions of seconds rather than days, months, or years.

Educate About Alternative Time Patterns Available to Schools

Because the traditional time frame for schools is comfortable and people are not well acquainted with alternative models, it is necessary to provide as much information as possible about the efforts to reframe time in school. Since April of 1992, the National Education Commission on Time and Learning has been

studying "the quality and the adequacy of the time U.S. students devote to learning."(Anderson, 1994) Among other things, they have looked at the amount of time allocated to learning activities, the way children use time outside of school, the length of school days and school years and the political and financial issues related to time and schooling. The results of their study will be useful in helping people define some of the alternatives to the traditional school day and school year. Some of the alternative patterns are:

- The Extended Day:
  The extended school day generally refers to a longer school day and/or a day that includes before- and after-school programs.

- The Extended Year:
  Schools that are in session for 200 days per year or longer. The extended year option provides an opportunity "for students to attend for 11 months and complete 12 years of instruction in 10 years. Anderson (1994) reported only 10 schools offering extended learning programs of 210 days or more when the Commission on Time and Learning began their study in 1992, but stated more schools were beginning to experiment with the idea.

- Year-round Schools:
  The term, year-round schools, generally describe a pattern whereby the 180 days of student time is redistributed in alternative time tracks. Peltier (1991) discussed year-round schooling as a means of providing options for students and families. He described two types of year-round schedules: "single track and multi-track. Each plan offers students options for when they will be in attendance and when they will be on vacation. The single track is a variation of the traditional school calendar in which all students attend school at the same time and vacation at the same time even though their school year may be designed in a 45 days of class and 15 days of vacation plan. Multi-track plans offer the 45-15, 60-20, 60-15, 90-30, trimester, quarter, and quinmester options and have students on various tracks at various times. Students must attend three quarters, two trimesters of four quinmesters and they can select their "off time" according to their needs. They also have the option of attending classes during their "off time" to enhance or accelerate their learning.

- The Reorganized Day:
  The reorganized school day is based on the idea that the typical, finite, tightly scheduled class periods do not necessarily for every learning

activity. The reorganized day takes into consideration the length of learning experience based on student need. The Copernican plan is an example of the reorganization of learning experiences based on curriculum demands and student need. (Carroll, 1994) This plan exemplifies the "shift of mind" Senge (1990) talked about ; it challenges the traditional organizational pattern of class periods.

The serious investigation and innovation of alternative time patterns appears to have gained impetus as a result of issues raised in the 1983 report, *A Nation at Risk*, The National Goals for Education, and the growing concern over the capacity of public schools to provide an appropriate education for America's youth.

Research About Alternative Time Plans

Schools do not and should not adopt the simplistic notion that there are only two ways to increase student productivity in schools; longer days or longer years. "What is key," according to Moorman and Ergermeier (1992), "is that schools be able to adopt clear and persuasive missions sufficient to distinguish them in meaningful ways from other alternatives, that they implement programs that concentrate resources and effort toward achievement of their missions, and that they are able to learn systematically from their own experience and continue to make corrections for shortcomings in their performance." Traditional time patterns may be one obstacles to learning that is in need of correction As discussed earlier, there are a number of options from which schools can develop alternative time patterns. Many logical arguments, ranging from better utilization of school facilities to increased learning opportunities for students have been advanced during the past few years. A Harvard University research team found the Coperincan schedule (reorganized day) enabled students to complete high school courses on a very intense schedule and do significantly better than their 180 day counterparts. (Carroll, 1994) Glines (1987) reported

year-round educational programs "help people individually, and society in general, by providing calendar, curriculum, and family options which more closely fit the changing lifestyles, work patterns, and community involvements for large segments of the population." According to Toch (1993) "In a 1991 review of 100 research projects, Herbert Walberg of the University of Illinois at Chicago found that in 9 out of 10 instances student achievement rises with the amount of time in class."

While the proponents of alternative time patterns can speak to easing overcrowded conditions and providing options for families and students a number of flags have been raised about the notion of merely increasing time without a corresponding increase in school quality. In reference to the issue of time and the quality of schools, Boyer (1983) said, "many school people seem more concerned about how long students stay in school than what they should know when they depart. . . . .More substance, not more time is our urgent concern!" In *A Place Called School,* Goodlad (1984) suggested, "If our interest is in quality educational experiences, we must stop providing only time. I would always choose fewer hours well used over more hours engaged in sterile activities. Increasing the days and hours in school settings will in fact be counterproductive unless there is a simultaneously marked improvement in how time is used." (p. 283). Berliner and Fisher (1985) added their doubts about increasing quantity of time without enhancing the skills and knowledge of teachers. Hossler (1988) reported, "research generally supports the conclusion that increased instructional time has modest positive effects on learning. However, the relationship between time and achievement is not strong, and policy-makers should not expect large gains to result from increasing the amount of instructional time in the school day/year. Moreover, increasing the

amount of instructional time does not guarantee an increase in engaged time-time spent actively engaged in learning." Her claims were substantiated earlier by Walberg (1982) and Karweit (1984) and others.

While the concern about the legitimate use of additional student time remains as valid as it was during the early 80's, there appear to be additional forces driving the debate about the pluses and minuses of alternative time patterns. During the late 1980's and early 1990's the dialogue about restructuring intensified and more schools joined with those already offering extended school years. In 1992, the National Association for Year-Round Education reported 204 public school districts on year-round schedules compared to 152 in 1991. "The move is driven by education and economics", according to Charles Ballinger (1992), the Executive Secretary of the National Year-Round School Association. "More people are doubting the wisdom of long summer vacations that thwart students' educational progress and leaves valuable school facilities dormant for long periods of time." he said. States such as California and Texas have long been proponents of year-round schedules to help overcrowding from growing populations and alleviating the need to build new buildings. Concern over shrinking school budgets and overcrowding have combined with changes in the U.S. social demographics. Many families are comprised of two wage earners while 14.9 million have a single-parent as sole supporter. During the 1990's, 82% of women in the workforce have school-aged children (Anderson, 1994) Increased levels of violence in the society have put more children at risk than any previous time in our history. All of this as changed the perspective of Americans about the function of the school and has propelled the issue of increased time in school to a higher level of dialogue. For all of these reasons, the idea of increasing students' time in school seems to be increasingly more

acceptable to the public. Michael Barrett , in the November 1990 issue of the *Atlantic Monthy*, reported 33% of Americans polled in 1959 were in favor of increasing the number of days per year spent in school but by 1989, 48% were in favor. The 25th Annual Gallup/Phi Delta Kappa Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools (1993) reported 52% of the public endorsed an increase in the amount of time students spend in school by extending the school day or school year; 47% favored an extended school year, 33% favored an extended school day, and 5% preferred saturday morning classes as a method for increasing student time.

Examining The Function of Schools in the 21st Century

Contemporary American society calls for a re-examination of the traditional school calendar. Contrary to popular opinion, schools have not always met for just nine months. Brekke (1992) reminds us that "prior to and through the 1800s, our urban centers, such as New York, Philadelphia, Boston, Baltimore, Chicago, and Cincinnati, maintained schools for 11 to 12 months a year in response to a burgeoning immigrant population. By 1915, largely due to the onset of the industrial revolution . . . the nine month school year became the nation's standard. The "traditional school year" has existed in virtually the same form for the last 75+ years."

There are plenty of reasons to suspect rapid changes in the society have influenced the ideas about almost all services expected from some of the nations traditional institutions. For example, banks are quick to point out their expanded time frames; with the aid of telecommunications "bankers hours" are, at last, 24 hours a day! Medical services are available at emergency rooms and free standing clinics at any time of the day or night. Many businesses are open

7 days a week to accommodate customers who are at work during what used to be traditional shopping times. In addition to their expanded hours of operation, many of these traditional institutions have taken on additional functions. Banks, for example, offer brokerage services, insurance plans, bill paying services, social and travel opportunities, and 24 hour account access. Medical centers offer wellness classes, health fairs, menu planning,counseling services, and a variety of specialized clinics. And when we can't get what we want from our traditional institutions, we invent new ones to take their place; witness the rise of United Parcel Service and other like carriers who have out-delivered the U.S. Post Office. What would lead us to believe the public schools could or should escape these trends?

In an address to educators gathered to celebrate the 100th anniversary of a private, midwestern college, John Goodlad (1994) discussed the importance of a well defined mission for the nations elementary and secondary schools and he called on the audience to reflect on the function of schools in contemporary society. Goodlad expressed the view that the primary function of schools is the care and shelter of the young; the provision of a safe and nurturing environment during the day. "Child caring," he stated, "is an educational process." If, as Goodlad suggests, the school functions as the place designated by society to care for children during the day, it will likely serve as the primary depository for the young until they are old enough to fend for themselves. This function does make sense, especially in the 1990's when dual income families and single parent families are in the majority. America's families rely on school as much or more than during anytime during recent history, but schools have been slow to warm up to the idea that they serve primarily as care providers. In the sense that schools function as child care centers, there may be little anyone should do

to radically adjust the time structures associated with this function. However, the picture changes when purpose is added to function. Parents want more than custodial care; they want children to develop their intellectual and social skills in an environment that is caring and educational. That being the case, the mission of the public schools seems abundantly clear; ":to create a supportive environment where children will be prepared to enter the human conversation."

Tips for Schools: Engaging The Community in The Dialogue

Excellent outcomes require excellent planning. If we are willing to give serious consideration to the "Who, What, Where, When, Why, and How" of public education in the contemporary society, it seems new mental models for school must be raised and explored. Many of the models should address the issue of providing alternative time patterns for students. The following guidelines may serve to assist school districts in the creation of a dialogue about the future of schools and schooling with the community:

- Sponsor Public Forums to inform citizens about the school's mission in contemporary society. Adopting Goodlad's ideas, the school serves as a care provider and delivers an important service. Schools have accepted an expanded role in child care as the needs of parents have increased, that role alone requires additional time and attention. Rapid changes in information and technology have had a tremendous impact on the economy and lifestyle of citizens and the school. It is difficult for schools to deliver their services in the time available.
    - Examine how the functions and purposes of schools have been changed by other systemic changes

- Organize School/Community Learning Teams to examine the mental models we now use to frame our beliefs about schools and schooling and develop new models that are more in harmony with the lifestyles that exist today.

- Develop a plan to assist the school to better meet its obligations and to accomplish its mission.
    - One of the objectives of the plan must be to consider alternative time patterns for schools.

- It is important to develop a plan that enables people to move at a comfortable rate toward expanded goals and new time patterns.
- Part of the plan should be to develop a process to assist the district to continuously scan the environment for trends and the needs of clients.

- Implement the plan over time and monitor it constantly. The plan must be flexible so changes can be made as soon as new information about variables that impact the business of the school are discovered.

- Provide continuous feedback to everyone concerned about the progress of the plan. Help them understand how and why adjustments were made and the impact those adjustments are likely to have on the successful accomplishment of the schools mission.
  - Feedback should be provided about student and teacher attitude toward school under the new time arrangements, attendance, student progress toward individual and group goals, achievement scores, etc.

The move away from traditional calendars toward alternative time patterns must be understood and accepted by the public. It is a significant move with tremendous potential. When talking about alternative time patterns for schools, Ballinger (1993) stated, "We're not just changing the school calendar, we're changing the whole rhythm of American life."

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